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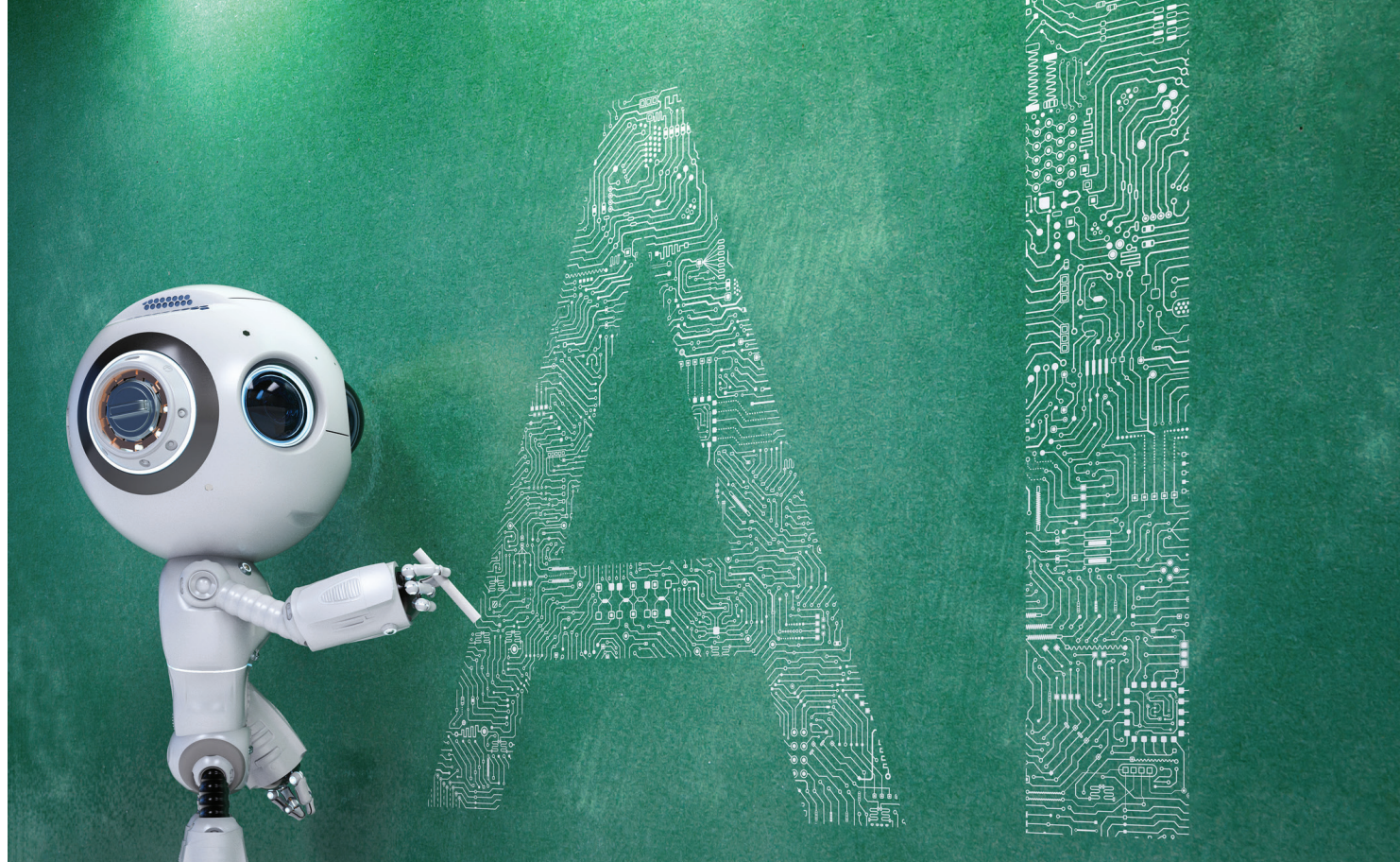


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The role of AI in the classroom

Artificial intelligence and social media have their place in education – within boundaries, writes Trevor Crighton

Social media has been a fixture in our lives for two decades now – and artificial intelligence (AI) has been around in various forms for years. Public awareness around and access to AI really exploded at the end of 2022 when ChatGPT brought it into the mainstream. Millions of words have been written since then about how its application is going to revolutionise industries and the way we access and manage knowledge.

It's no surprise then that both social media and AI can play an important role in education in South Africa – for both teachers and learners.

SOCIAL LEARNING

Iviwe Mtubu, a Jakes Gerwel candidate fellow and University of Cape Town graduate, who teaches geography and maths literacy at Westerford High School, says social media in education has primarily been teachers adopting the technology to

help encourage learners to recite and sing answers or educational content provided in videos or audio clips, using the same kind of drivers that the platforms use to make songs massive international hits or popularise personalities.

Mtubu says that despite concerns about content quality – and in the face of the debate about whether learning to “parrot” responses is evidence of learning – there's potential to leverage social media platforms for fostering critical thinking, creativity and problem-solving. “By encouraging students to engage in meaningful discussions, analyse diverse perspectives and evaluate information critically, it's an opportunity for educators to harness social media as a tool for intellectual growth,” he says.

There is also an onus on teachers to help learners discern misinformation on social media. “Educators play a crucial role in teaching students media literacy skills. By providing guidance on fact-checking,



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NIALL MCNULTY

“An AI-powered debate platform could present students with arguments from multiple viewpoints on a given topic, challenging them to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each position and form their own well-reasoned opinions.” – Niall McNulty

source evaluation and critical analysis of online content, teachers can empower students to distinguish between credible information and falsehoods,” Mtubu says.

Social media platforms can facilitate collaborative learning, virtual field trips and real-time interaction with experts, enriching traditional classroom instruction. Additionally, platforms such as YouTube and TikTok can serve as creative outlets for sharing educational content, including demonstrations of complex concepts or experiments. “I use the words ‘opportunity’ and ‘can’ intentionally because I believe it is possible, but not the case currently,” he says.

One of the major social media pitfalls – and one that has the biggest impact on younger people – is that criticism can spread quickly online. In the education space, this could be seen as a kind of “social grading” of schoolwork.

Mtubu says negative feedback on social media posts could potentially deter students from engaging in online learning activities. “However, by fostering a supportive and constructive online learning environment, educators can mitigate this risk. Encouraging respectful dialogue, providing constructive feedback, and emphasising the educational value of social media interactions can help promote positive engagement and learning outcomes,” he says.

Some schools do – and many more should – have social media charters that establish guidelines for responsible social

media use in education. “A well-defined charter could outline best practices, privacy protections and digital citizenship principles to ensure safe and productive online interactions within educational settings,” says Mtubu.

“There are no proper guidelines for schools and teachers on how to deal with social-media-related matters and the boundary between what should concern the school and what should not.”

BLENDING AUTHENTIC AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Niall McNulty, programme manager, data and AI at Cambridge University Press & Assessment, says that generative AI can enhance personalised learning experiences by tailoring questions based on students’ responses. “For example, if a student is struggling, the AI tutor can ask easier questions or provide additional support material. These tutors can also present questions in different ways to encourage learners to think critically and approach problems from various angles.”

Teachers are also able to train AI models to provide feedback in a similar manner as their own by supplying historical questions and responses as examples. Once trained, the AI model can independently provide feedback to learners, following the teacher’s approach.

He theorises that AI can play a significant role in fostering critical thinking skills by

exposing students to diverse perspectives and encouraging them to analyse information critically. “For example, an AI-powered debate platform could present students with arguments from multiple viewpoints on a given topic, challenging them to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each position and form their own well-reasoned opinions,” says McNulty.

Crucial to the application of AI in the classroom – as with social media – are responsible use strategies and school policies, especially as plagiarism is a growing concern since the speed at which models are evolving is making it more and more difficult for teachers to detect AI-generated content.

“Addressing the issue of AI and plagiarism includes discussing the ethical implications of using AI to generate content, the importance of academic integrity and the consequences of plagiarism with students,” he says. “Educators should provide clear guidelines on how students can use AI tools as part of the learning process, such as for brainstorming ideas or generating rough drafts, while emphasising the need for students to critically analyse and refine the AI-generated content.” ■